

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERENNIAL PRINCIPLES
OF THE CLASSICAL REALIST TRADITION

By

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present in a being in order to make it the kind of being it is. "Substance" is used of beings that exist "on their own," independently of other beings. The term "accident" is used of those secondary and dependent aspects of being which could not exist save as manifestations of a more primary being. Being is further divided into the concepts "act" and "potency." Act refers to the full actualization of being, potency to unrealized possibilities of being. Act and potency are the intrinsic causes of change, as against the extrinsic efficient and final causes.

*Dost thou hope to sound the depths of God,
To reach the limits of the Almighty?
The Book of Job, 11:7.*

CHAPTER 28

UNCREATED BEING

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

BEFORE the intellect rises to the formation of scientific or philosophic judgments it has certain natural, spontaneous insights into the nature of man and the structure of reality, a kind of reflection, if it is not clouded by prejudice or false teaching, of the native evidence of things in the mirror of the intellect. Among these insights is the knowledge of the existence of a superior being upon whom the world is dependent.

In the words of St. Thomas, "There is a certain general and confused knowledge of God in all men . . . because by his natural reason man is able at once to arrive at some knowledge of God."¹ The findings of modern anthropology confirm this observation. No matter how remote in time or how primitive in culture, it is impossible to find a tribe or a nation which has not believed in the existence of some kind of a god, however vague or twisted their idea might be. "There is," says Otto Karrer in *Religions of Mankind*, "a 'consensus generis humani,' an agreement of mankind so far as our present knowledge extends, in the belief that there exists an absolute and supreme Being above ourselves which has ordered the universe and human life in particular. . . . History knows of no people godless and devoid of religion, though here and there particular groups, schools of thought or governments may combat religion."²

The fact remains however that this primitive knowledge of God

¹ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 38; see also *Summa Theologiae*, I, 2, 1, ad 2.

² *Religions of Mankind* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), pp. 80-81.

is likely to be extremely hazy and indefinite, for although, as St. Thomas says, men for the most part know that there must be some cause of the order they see around them, "Who or of what kind this cause of order may be, or whether there be but one, cannot be gathered from this general consideration."³ It is important, therefore, to explore these primordial insights of common sense systematically, delineating the evidence in the stronger light of philosophical reflection.

The philosophical formulation of the arguments for the existence of God goes back to the time of Plato and Aristotle. A number of the arguments, such as those from order and causality, are found in common in nearly all philosophers. These arguments do not depend upon any particular philosophical system precisely because the evidence for them is accessible even to common sense. In other words, the evidence on which they rest is so basic that any philosopher who refused it would automatically block himself off from a great part of reality.

WHETHER THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IS SELF-EVIDENT

Some philosophers have maintained that the existence of God is so evident that it forces itself on our minds as soon as we are aware of what the name God means. Probably the most famous exponent of this view is St. Anselm, a philosopher and theologian who almost a thousand years ago set free an idea which has fascinated and tantalized the minds of men ever since.⁴

Anselm thought that we could know that God exists merely by considering all that is implied in the definition of God. We can all, even the atheist, he says, have at least the idea of God in our minds; this is the idea of the most perfect being we can think of,

³ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 38.

⁴ St. Anselm, born in 1033, in the north of Italy, entered the Benedictine Order at an early age. He helped found a new monastery at Bec, in Normandy, where he taught and wrote for many years. Eventually he became Abbot. Still later he was appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury, and suffered exile from England twice following on quarrels with the Crown over the question of Investitures. He died in exile in Holland in the year 1109. For the statement of his argument see the translation of the *Proslogium* in Sidney N. Deane's *Anselm* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishers, 1944). This edition contains also the reply of Gaunilon to Anselm.

"a being than whom nothing greater can be conceived." If we analyze what is implied in such a notion, we are forced to recognize that the most perfect being we can think of must be an actually existing being. For if we think of the most perfect being as non-existing then it would not be the most perfect being of which we were thinking. To illustrate, let us list side by side the characteristics of the most perfect being, the one existing, the other not existing:

BEING A

all-powerful
all-just
all-knowing
all-wise
all-loving
everlasting
unlimited, etc.
existing in my thought only

BEING B

all-powerful
all-just
all-knowing
all-wise
all-loving
everlasting
unlimited, etc.
existing both in my thought
and in reality.

Which of these, Being A or Being B, is the more perfect? Clearly we have to answer Being B, since a being that exists both in thought and in reality is more perfect than one that exists in thought alone. In fact we cannot even call Being A a perfect being, since it does not possess actual being. It is literally impossible, then, even to think of God, the infinitely perfect being, except as actually existing. Therefore, Anselm concludes, God exists.

Anselm's argument is not as strange as it looks at first sight. Its validity depends on his explanation of knowing. Working in the tradition of Plato and St. Augustine, Anselm holds that our knowledge is intuitive in character, derived from flashes of the eternal, unchanging types which are reflected in our souls. To know means to scan with the eye of the mind this inner sky of intelligible reality. In this inner world of ideas St. Anselm sees the idea of the perfect being, and as part of the make-up of this idea the note of actual and necessary existence. All he has to do to show the existence of God is to point out the content of this idea for others to look at. Just turn your gaze, he says in effect, and take a good look at what

is there for everybody to see. Thus for St. Anselm the argument might be more properly called a pointing out than a proof.

THE HISTORY OF THE ARGUMENT

Anselm's argument was held as a matter of course by a majority of the philosophers of the Middle Ages after his time. It was held as a reproach against the philosophy of St. Thomas in the thirteenth century that there was no room in it for this argument. Descartes made the argument a keystone in his philosophical system, and he was followed in this by such famed philosophers as Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. Even today the argument is not without its supporters. Descartes expressed the argument thus: "When the mind . . . reviews the different ideas that are in it, it discovers what is by far the chief among them — that of a Being omniscient, all-powerful, and absolutely perfect; and it observes that in this idea there is contained not only possible and contingent existence, as in the ideas of all other things which it clearly perceives, but existence absolutely necessary and eternal. And just as because, for example, the equality of its angles to two right angles is necessarily comprised in the idea of a triangle, the mind is firmly persuaded that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; so, from its perceiving necessary and eternal existence to be comprised in the idea which it has of an all-perfect Being, it ought manifestly to conclude that this all-perfect Being exists."⁵

CRITICISM OF THE ARGUMENT

The first objector to Anselm's argument was a contemporary, a monk called Gaunilon. Gaunilon said that he could think of a perfect island, an island with "an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the islands of the Blest." Now an island that exists is more perfect than an island that does not exist. It does not follow, however, that this imagined perfect island actually exists.

⁵ *The Principles of Philosophy*, I, 14, edited by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, Everyman edition (London and New York: J. M. Dent and E. P. Dutton, 1931), p. 170.

Anselm countered Gaunilon's argument by pointing out that the idea of God is unique among the ideas we find in our mind. The concept of God is the *only* idea which includes existence as part of its make-up, as part of its very definition. The idea of island, however, does not include the note of necessary existence. If I were to break down the idea into its essential elements I would find that I do not have to think of "actual existence" in order to think of "island." The same is true of any other idea I think of except one — the idea of God. For the note of existence, actual and necessary existence, enters into the very definition of God. He *is* existence, this is His very Being, and this is what I cannot help but see when I think of Him.

St. Thomas also denied the validity of Anselm's argument. Maintaining that all knowledge comes by way of the senses, he disagreed with St. Anselm about what an idea means. Whereas for St. Anselm ideas are independent realities, more real than sensible realities and directly affecting us, for St. Thomas the inner world of ideas is an abstraction from sense experience. The only actual existences we experience immediately are those of the sensible world around us. Since God cannot be an object of sense experience we cannot have direct knowledge of His existence but have to argue from the sensible world as an effect of God's power. It is true that if we want to think of God we cannot think of Him except as actually existing. But the necessity of which we are aware is simply the necessity within the thought-structure which we call the definition of God. It is not an intuition of an actual existence apart from our minds.

The validity of St. Thomas' criticism depends upon the explanation of man's knowing. Anselm's argument can be accepted only at the price of adopting an Augustinian or Cartesian philosophy of man, with all the difficulties and drawbacks which the history of thought shows are inherent in these positions. If on the other hand we hold to the Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretation of the nature and knowledge of man, the argument of St. Anselm has to be rejected.